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PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by Pax Christi International,
a non-governmental organization in consultative status
(category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication,
which is distributed in accordance with Economic and Social Council
resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[5 August 1994]

Persecution of religious minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran

1. On the occasion of the discussion by the Sub-Commission, under its agenda item 18, of the report submitted by Mr. Asbjorn Eide (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/36), Pax Christi International wishes to draw the attention of the Sub-Commission to the serious events which have recently taken place in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which appear to herald a new outbreak of the persecution of religious minorities which has for years been tolerated, and even encouraged, by the Islamic authorities. The denunciation to the Sub-Commission of three crimes which are particularly illustrative of the dangers threatening one of these minorities in Iran, coinciding as it does with the submission by Mr. Eide of his "suggestions for a comprehensive programme for the prevention of discrimination and the protection of minorities", seems particularly timely.
2. On 19 January 1994 Pastor Hovsepian Mehr, of the Church of Assemblies of God in Iran, was murdered in Teheran after publicly denouncing the sentencing to death for apostasy of Pastor Mehdi Dibaj, who had just spent nine years in prison. After the sentencing, and in response to international pressure, the Iranian authorities released Mehdi Dibaj. However, he did not survive his release long; on 24 June he was abducted not far from Teheran and murdered. A few days later, Pastor Tatavous Michaelian, the Chairman of the Protestant national council, who was endeavouring to find traces of Pastor Dibaj, was himself shot to death.
3. The international Press and the authorities of several countries were outraged by these murders. On 7 July 1994 Amnesty International stated: "In the light of the recent deaths, we fear that other leaders of the Christian community may be in danger, and we are seriously concerned for their safety". Amnesty International added that it had written to the Iranian President, Hashemi Rafsanjani, demanding an investigation into the circumstances of these crimes, mentioning at the same time that it had not so far received any reply to a similar letter sent to the Iranian government following the murder of the Reverend Hovsepian Mehr in January 1994.
4. In a letter addressed to the Council of Churches of the Assemblies of God, dated 11 January 1994 (nine days before he was murdered), Pastor Mehr drew attention to the threats and ill-treatment to which clerics and the faithful - especially converts - had been subjected in a number of cities in Iran - Gorgan, Isfahan, Kermanshah and Meshed. Since the seizure of power by Ayatollah Khomeiny, severe restrictions had been placed on the practice of the Christian religion, and the Christian schools had been closed. Pastor Arastou Sayah had been beheaded in Shiraz and Pastor Hossein Soudmand had been hanged in Meshed. Today, according to sources which, though different, are in agreement, a section of the Ministry of Information, under the direction of Mullah Mohseni, was recently instructed to undertake the elimination of the leaders of the Iranian Christian communities. In this context the murders of three pastors of the Protestant community since the beginning of the year imply that all the Christian communities -and even the other non-Shiite religious communities - are in real and imminent danger.
5. The United Nations is often criticised for remaining silent, or for intervening too late, in relation to tragic events which beset peoples and minorities within peoples. In face of the new persecutions which are developing in Iran it has a unique opportunity to take forestalling action and to bring pressure to bear on the Iranian government to induce it to abandon

its policy of religious repression, which is condemned in every instrument adopted by the international community.

6. Before he died, shot down by his murderers, Pastor Mehr wrote, in his letter to the Council of Churches of the Assemblies of God, "the 'keep quiet and wait and see' policy is a satanic one".

7. Pax Christi International urgently appeals to the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to bring this matter, by the appropriate procedures, to the attention of the competent bodies of the United Nations and, through them, of the Secretary-General.